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EPA's administrator says it is important to maintain a dialogue with the public about their concerns and fears about environmental regulations.

AMERICUS, GA — While the Environmental Protection Agency has not always seen eye to eye with farmers and other stakeholders in the agricultural industry, which boasts a \$56.7 billion impact to Georgia's economy, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson said Friday that rural areas should not think of the EPA as the big bad wolf of government agencies.

"There is such a fear in rural areas that the EPA is coming after you," Jackson spoke bluntly at a Friday Town Hall meeting in Americus. "We are trying to get the best data we can when addressing policy and your (agribusiness's) comments and input are needed."

Jackson, the head of EPA, was in south Georgia on Friday for a town hall meeting to find out what rural Georgians have to say about the environment.

The joint EPA-Congressional Black Caucus event was part of an Environmental Justice Tour designed to highlight the impact of environmental issues on communities. The meeting in Americus gave those involved in agribusiness a chance to share concerns about pending EPA regulations that affect agriculture, as well as air and water quality issues.

During the meeting Friday at South Georgia Technical College in Americus, Jackson listened to concerns from representatives of several agribusinesses, including the Georgia Peanut Commission and the Georgia Cotton Council.

Approximately 150 individuals from around the state were present at the meeting.

Many representatives from agricultural industries expressed concerns over some of the EPA's recent regulations they say negatively impact agribusiness.

Recently the EPA announced it was considering stricter regulations for particulate matter, or dust, based on health concerns. The EPA is required under the Clean Air Act to reassess national air quality standards every five years. New regulations are scheduled to be in place by 2011. If a proposal by the EPA becomes law, the amount of allowable dust released in the air from farming and other businesses would have to be cut in half.

That spells bad news for farmers of one of Georgia's biggest crops — peanuts.

Many farmers and agricultural representatives argued that dust was a way of life in rural areas and that you cannot farm without the possibility of dust.

Jackson addressed the dust concerns by stating that the EPA will not enact regulations that would prevent farmers from growing a particular crop.

"We are making sure and taking great care that you aren't required to do something that does not allow you to grow your crop," she told the crowd.

Among the concerns farmers had were the cap-and-trade bill, regulation of bio fuels, soil fumigate plans and the regulation of greenhouse gases.

Steve Brown, assistant dean for the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service, said he was concerned about the EPA's regulation of pesticide drift when farmers spray their fields.

"No one wants drift," Brown told Jackson. "You want your pesticide to hit your target, but the droplet size regulation is not the answer."

Brown explained to the EPA administrator that some farmers have been using electrostatic sprayers that charge the pesticide droplets, allowing the pesticide to hit their targets specifically. He urged the EPA and Jackson to consider advances in technology before making regulations.

U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop, D-Albany, a member of the Congressional Black Caucus, said Friday's town hall meeting is an example of what government should be.

"It's a win-win situation," Bishop said. "There was a cooperative outreach between both sides. It really showed what a government agency working for the people looks like."

He said the meeting was important because it gave Jackson a chance to hear comments from the people her agency's policies affect.

"I think now she (Jackson) can gain new insight and take that back with her," said Bishop. "This is a good first step for working towards an EPA that works for the best interest of the stakeholders and not involuntarily work against them."